

# We got game



It's possible to have major fun while touring minor league outdoor parks, thanks to Ballpark Tours of St. Paul.

By Sarah Johnson  
Special to the Pioneer Press

"Masterpieces of chaos and fun" reads one description of the annual road trips organized by Julian Loscalzo of Ballpark Tours, a St. Paul-based company celebrating more than 30 years of touring.

For hard-core baseball fans, these are not just vacations — they're eclectic tributes to our national pastime. Formed as a protest against the Twin Cities' transition from an outdoor ballpark to a sterile, Teflon sky, the tours have taken more than 2,000 revelers from 11 states to nearly 300 ball games during the past three decades.

This summer promised a "Midwest League Meander," a three-

day, three-game excursion to minor league parks in the Iowa towns of Davenport, Clinton and Cedar Rapids. We paid \$475 per person for double occupancy in each hotel room.

As we prepared to begin our journey early on a recent Friday morning, Loscalzo is barking into a cellphone with his distinct East Coast accent.

"He said he was going on a baseball trip? We are the baseball trip, and he's not here," said the Philadelphia native.

Meanwhile, our air-conditioned motor coach is filling with an unpretentious mix of about 40 passengers — single men, married couples and the Ballpark Tours accountant and his family. Single women dominate a few rows, proving baseball diamonds can be a girl's best friend. Most are Ballpark Tours veterans, but a few are on the tour for the first time.

Casey and Jim Coyle will join the group in Davenport after driving from their home in Kentucky, garnering the prize for traveling the farthest.

"We've had everyone from cab drivers to former university deans and legislators on these trips,"

Loscalzo said. "The nice thing is (that) while we're on the road, we're just baseball fans. Sometimes, when you see them at their jobs you forget, then ask them, 'Oh, this is what you do?'"

## DYERSVILLE

Introductions begin as we meander down the interstate to our first destination, the "Field of Dreams" in Dyersville, Iowa, the

site of the 1989 baseball movie starring Kevin Costner and James Earl Jones.

One middle-aged woman describes growing up in Duluth and attending games at Wade Stadium. Someone else jokes that his favorite memories are the ones he can't remember. "You can't prove anything," he shouts.

As we cross the border into

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**Above:** The "Field of Dreams" in Dyersville, Iowa, was the site of the 1989 movie and still attracts baseball fans.

**Below:** Modern Woodmen Park in Davenport, Iowa, was home to the Twins Class A affiliate from 1999 to 2004.

PHOTOS: SARAH JOHNSON



## Quick Trips > Regional events

**1. FINLAYSON White Pine Logging and Threshing Show:** 35th annual event includes threshing, blacksmithing, barrel making, dancing and more. Aug. 31-Sept. 2. 763-389-1397. whitepineshow.webs.com.

**2. KIESTER Farming of Yesteryear Old-Time Threshing Show:** 30th annual event includes antique tractors; black-smithing; tours of re-created farmhouse, country school and more. Sept. 7-8. 507-525-1828. farmingofyesteryear.com.

**3. MANTORVILLE Marigold Days:** 48th annual event includes huge antique and flea market, arts and crafts, quilt and flower show, music stage, kids' fishing contest, history, bingo, dance and more. Sept. 7-8. 507-635-5519. marigolddays.com.

**4. NEVIS: Uff Da! Days:** Bingo, horseshoe tournament, kids' games, "Continuing Saga of Ole & Lena," music and lutefisk, Swedish meatball and lefse dinner. Aug. 30-31. 800-247-0054. uffdadays.org.

**5. NORTHFIELD Defeat of Jesse James Days:** Re-enactment of James-Younger Gang's notorious 1876 bank raid. Also bike tour, rodeo, horseshoe hunt, classic car show, tractor pull, arts festival, carnival, parade and more. Sept. 4-8. 800-658-2548. djjd.org.

**6. NOWTHEN Wapiti Historical Rendezvous:** 7th annual re-creation of North American fur trade and early frontier. Black-powder, tomahawk, archery competitions. Sept. 20-22. 612-382-9669. wapitibuckskinners.com.

**7. ST. PETER Rock Bend Folk Festival:** 23rd annual event celebrates southern Minnesota's folk arts and artists. Food, music and more. Sept. 7-8. 800-473-3404. rockbend.org.

**8. WINONA Great Dakota Gathering:** 10th annual event includes community talk circle, American Indian art show and sale, moccasins tournament and more. Sept. 13-15. 800-657-4972. winonadakotaunityalliance.org.

**9. ALLENTON Big Concertina Jamboree Festival:** Continuous concertina jamming on 3 stages. All players welcome. Concertinas to play, trade, sell. Dancing, fish fry and more. Aug. 30-Sept. 1. 262-255-3454. http://allentonwi.org/calendar.html.

**10. ALMA Music and Arts Festival:** Five musical acts, local artists, minnow races, kids' activities and more. Sept. 1. almapwiconsin.com/events/musicartsfestival.html.

**11. HAMMOND Running of the Llamas:** Community band, running of the llamas, rib fest. Sept. 14. 715-796-8869. therunningofthellamas.com.

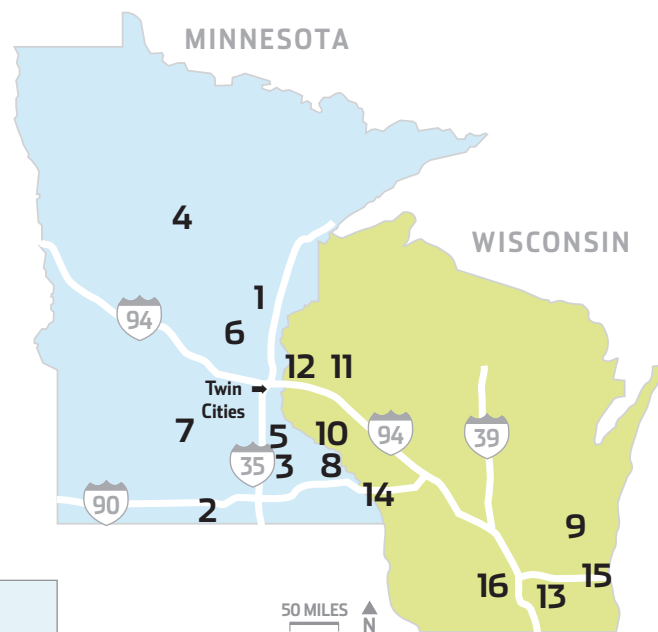
**12. HUDSON Sheep Dog Trials:** Dogs and handlers compete during 28th annual event sponsored by Wisconsin Working Stock Dog Association. Commentary and concessions available. Aug. 30-Sept. 2. 715-386-1856. wwsda.org.

**13. JEFFERSON Gemuetlichkeit Days:** Celebration of German heritage includes food, dancing, arts and crafts fair, biking events. Sept. 13-15. 920-674-4511. gdays.org.

**14. LA CROSSE Storytelling Festival:** National, regional, local storytellers perform at family-focused event. Sept. 6-7. 608-797-2807. lacrossestoryfest.com.

**15. MILWAUKEE Harley-Davidson 110th Anniversary Celebration:** Events at Henry W. Maier Festival Park include 60 bands on five stages, product displays, themed exhibits, food and more. Aug. 29-Sept. 1. 877-436-8738. 110.harley-davidson.com.

**16. NEW GLARUS Wilhelm Tell Festival:** 75th annual event includes "Wilhelm Tell" performances, Swiss music, yodeling contest, parade, art in the park, children's lantern parade. Aug. 30-Sept. 1. 608-527-2095. wilhelmtell.org.







Veteran's Memorial Stadium in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, is home to the Cedar Rapids Kernels, the Twins Class A affiliate.

COURTESY IOWAHWYMAN

CONTINUED FROM 7E

## > We got game

Iowa, two volunteers nicknamed "Sacrifice Bunt" and "Sacrifice Fly" set up food for lunch and, of course, a sacrifice to the baseball gods. The movie's iconic red barn and white house with the wrap-around porch come into view and we are warned not

to wander into the cornfields lest we find ourselves in another era. Marv Maiers, a movie extra who had a role as a baseball player, welcomes our group. When asked about the popularity of the site, he simply shrugs and offers that "it sounds cliché, but people do just keep coming."

### DAVENPORT

Back on the bus, I view corn as far as the eye can see, then notice the seats in the first

row have been removed and replaced by two coolers. I am offered a bagel topped with salmon, cream cheese, onions and capers. Clearly, this group knows how to stock up for a road trip. We head for the Quad Cities — Davenport and Bettendorf in Iowa, and Rock Island and Moline in Illinois — and joke that for us, the Quad Cities are Dyersville, Davenport, Clinton and Cedar Rapids. Before the first game in Davenport, a few of us change into the mustard-colored

"Midwest League Meander" T-shirts that were handed out at our centrally located hotel. "We always like to stay downtown to get a feel for the pulse of the city and have unique urban experiences," Loscalzo said. By the time we make the three-block walk to Modern Woodmen Park, home to the Twins Class A affiliate from 1999 to 2004, it's starting to rain. The game between the Quad Cities River Bandits and Peoria Chiefs is played under a light drizzle. We spend the time standing under an overhang debating the pressures of being a setup man as opposed to a closer and other issues of the day. We also keep our eyes open for foul balls when left-handed batters are at the plate.

### TOUR TALE

Trip participant Jerry Barte of St. Paul shares a classic Ballpark Tours tale:

"One Sunday in the late '90s, we were coming back from Chicago and were supposed to stop in Milwaukee for a Brewers game. There was a Michael Bolton concert before the game, which would cause it to start late and for us to get home very late.

"We had two buses, so some decided to stay for the Brewers game and the other bus took the rest of the group to a Madison Black Wolf game at Warner Park, which was a Northern League team at the time. We arrived to discover the place was nearly empty — there were literally about 25 people there.

"Since we had limited interest in either team, we decided to start rooting for the first-base umpire. I remember his name was Don, so we started chanting things like, 'Don, Don, he's our man...' When he was overruled by the home-plate umpire, we booed. We were met with bemused indifference by the ushers and other fans in the stands.

"A few weeks later, Don was an umpire at the Saints game, and when I shouted something at him, he looked around suspiciously like, 'Oh, great, those people are here again.'"

— Sarah Johnson

# GO GETAWAYS

**KEY**

- Attraction (casino, fair, racetrack etc.)
- Beach
- Bicycle Trail
- Boat Ramp
- Cabin rental
- Campground
- Canoeing
- Fishing
- Golfing
- Hiking Trail
- Historic Site
- Leashed Pets
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- Playground
- Swimming Pool
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**CLINTON**

Late Saturday afternoon, we board the bus for Clinton, 40 miles northeast of Davenport and home of the Lumberjacks, a Class A affiliate of the Seattle Mariners. When Loscalzo asks if everyone is accounted for, someone replies, "We're within the margin of error."

A notebook is passed around as we enjoy a scenic Mississippi River drive. Comments range from admonishing a group member for bringing oysters and anchovies on the bus to "Davenport has a nice farmers' market."

In Clinton, we are seated in the first three rows of box seats — the remainder of the ballpark has metal bleachers — with varying degrees of game attentiveness in evidence.

One couple religiously keep track of every pitch on scorecards, while another couple chat away over a bag of kettle corn.

Some participants just react to the crack of the bat and enjoy their adult beverage on the clear, 75-degree August night. It's perfect baseball weather.

The group cheers as the ballpark announcer welcomes

Ballpark Tours. Smartphones help solve trivia questions and provide updates on that night's Twins game.

"What's the consensus? Was that a stolen base or wild pitch?" asks Jerry Barte of St. Paul.

Unlike most new stadiums, Clinton's scoreboard includes only the basic information of score and innings, and the late-evening sun makes it hard to see even that.

Back on the bus, someone announces "6-4, Twins win!" as the lights of Davenport's Centennial Bridge come into view.

### CEDAR RAPIDS

A trip highlight is our Sunday afternoon, all-you-can-eat seats at Veteran's Memorial Stadium in Cedar Rapids.

An easy four-hour trip from Minneapolis, the second largest city in Iowa now hosts the Twins Class A affiliate, the Cedar Rapids Kernels. We realize the Kernels are playing the River Bandits (an Astros affiliate) at the same time the Twins are playing the Astros at Target Field. What baseball fan doesn't love minutiae like that?

"People really know their baseball here in Cedar Rapids," said Jake Mauer, manager of the Kernels (and yes, brother of Joe), in an inter-

view earlier this summer. "The minor leagues are a great way to see professional baseball at its first level — it may not be as crisp as the majors, but you'll see a lot of raw talent."

Those words seem prescient when an error by the opposing center-fielder allows the Kernels to tie and eventually win in the bottom of the ninth. We exit the stadium with bellies full of hot dogs, hamburgers and brats under the Kernels-Twins banner proudly proclaiming, "This is Twins Territory."

As we travel back to St. Paul, awards are presented, including Rookie of the Year to a group member who is celebrating her 21st birthday.

To wrap up the trip, Loscalzo proudly announces, "Questions, comments, suggestions? Remember ... we don't care."

Yes, somewhere in the middle of Iowa, we found, as someone eloquently put it, "just the right amount of structure and lunacy."

Sarah Johnson is a freelance writer living in St. Louis Park.

For more information about Ballpark Tours, call 651-227-3437 or visit www.ballpark-tours.net/index.html.

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